

# Retiring student advocate Margaret Harner leaves legacy of statewide reforms, individual successes

By ERICA HOBBS (/USERS/PROFILE/?UID=153)

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In his more than 40 years in education, **Dr. James Hawkins**, former superintendent of the **Ypsilanti Public Schools** (<http://www.ypsd.org/>), says he's never met a woman with as much commitment to social justice as student advocate **Margaret Harner**.

Harner, an advocate with the **Student Advocacy Center of Michigan** (<http://www.studentadvocacycenter.org/index.shtml>), has retired after more than 40 years of service to the students of Washtenaw County and the state at large.

Hawkins, who also serves on the center's Board of Directors, described Harner as genuine, but most of all, tenacious.

"I admire her, and I know at the Student Advocacy Center, we deeply miss her talents and her skills, because she was a very collaborative individual and she made us all better."

The nonprofit organization works with schools on behalf of struggling students to help them succeed in and complete their education. It has an annual budget of less than \$300,000 and currently employs two full-time staff and one part-time staff member at its headquarters in Ypsilanti and one full-time staff member at its office in Jackson.

"She's just really passionate about children, and that's what she puts first in her work," **Peri Stone-Palmquist**, the center's executive director, said. You don't want to be on the wrong side of an argument with Margaret."

For Harner, student advocacy wasn't something she wanted to do; it was something she had to do.

"You look at these children and you see their potential. If it's not being tapped, I just felt an obligation to help that happen," she said.

Harner has been making that happen since she began working with students as a teacher in the early 1970s. After teaching kindergarten in Washtenaw County from 1970 to 1972, Harner decided to work with children in a different capacity by running an Ypsilanti-based adoption agency, **Colombian-American Friends**, that specialized in placing Colombian children with Michigan families.

She also owned and operated the **Teacher Shop and Learning Center** in Ypsilanti, which provided teaching supplies and educational seminars to area teachers.

While running the adoption agency, Harner was also working to provide Latin American cultural competency training to teachers and students in local elementary schools, where she said she was astounded to discover that teachers were still using corporal punishment as a means of discipline.

"I don't want [discipline] that lowers their self-esteem," she said. "I want to heighten their self-esteem so they can be productive citizens."

Harner began challenging corporal punishment in Ypsilanti schools and was soon appointed to a legislative task force to end corporal punishment on a state level. It was there in 1976 that she met Student Advocacy Center founder **Ruth Zweifler**, and her relationship with the center began.

Harner started as a volunteer, helping Zweifler to expand the center's services beyond the Ann Arbor area, eventually making it a



Margaret Harner in the board room at the Student Advocacy Center in Ypsilanti. Harner recently retired after more than 30 years with the center.

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statewide agency. Then in 1992, the center was able to hire Harner officially with a grant from the Ford Foundation (<http://www.fordfoundation.org/>), and she has been there ever since.

"I think she's unwavering in her beliefs that all children should be, can be and must be well-educated," Zweifler said. "She takes that word 'all' very literally, that all children, without exceptions, can learn and should learn, and we owe it to them and we owe it to ourselves to see that they are well-educated."

While Harner did work with all children in her advocacy, one of her greatest accomplishments was bringing to light the special needs of foster children.

Foster children, she said, often have to change schools when they change homes and have to rebuild a support network of friends, teachers and mentors all over again. She said this lack of stability makes it difficult for foster children to succeed.

Harner said one of her greatest accomplishments was her work on the **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987**, which added a requirement that schools provide free transportation for foster children to their last school of origin to allow them to remain in the same school, even if they've moved out of the district.

Hawkins said addressing the needs of foster children was one area on which he and Harner worked particularly closely together.

He said Harner frequently picked up foster children or troubled students herself and drove them to school. In one case, he said, she personally saved a teenager from an unstable home from dropping out of high school within a month of graduation. Not only did the student graduate, he said, but Harner helped him to enroll in community college in Lansing, personally moving him there and helping him to find a job, apartment and local support services.

"That's the kind of work she does," Hawkins said. "She goes above and beyond."

Ann Arbor resident and mother **Catherine McClary** said Harner was instrumental in keeping her son in public high school after the school suggested he transfer to an alternative school when he was having academic problems.

"Margaret has the absolute respect from school administrators in the entire county," she said. "When she's on your side as an advocate, everybody sits down at the table and everybody is less emotional. They worked out a schedule around [my son's] strengths, and he's done really well."

Looking back, Harner said she's proud of her work in student advocacy and the progression that schools have made. She said students now have more options when it comes to education, such as alternative and private schools, and that has helped to make public schools more competitive and cooperative in working with students with special needs.

She said the biggest challenge facing schools today is widespread suspension and expulsion, which she said denies children the right to an education and only causes further problems down the road.

"There are creative ways to deal with circumstances like that," she said. "That kind of conversation doesn't go on much. Now we're working with schools to help them get to that place."

As she leaves her role, Harner said she's looking forward to retirement and spending more time with her children and grandchildren. She said she also plans to devote more time volunteering at the **Washtenaw Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights** (<http://wicir.com/>), which she co-founded.

The Student Advocacy Center will be holding a "**Bittersweet Bash**" on Sunday, Nov. 11, to honor Harner's service and raise money to establish the **Margaret Sayles Harner Advocacy Fund** to continue her work. The event will take place from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. at the **Ladies Literary Club** (<http://www.ladiesliteraryclub.org/>) in Ypsilanti and will include a dessert bar, silent auction and live music. Tickets are \$75 each and can be purchased online here (<http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/272926>) or by phone at 1-800-838-3006.

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